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SUBJECT: ISLAM ON THE TIBETAN PLATEAU - TWO LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

REF: A. A) 07 CHENGDU 267                      B) 07 CHENGDU 219  
      B. C) 07 BEIJING 733                      D) 07 BEIJING 732

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: According to a Tibetan active in Lhasa's Muslim community who studied Islam in Nepal and Pakistan, the inflow of Muslim businessmen and laborers from other parts of China into traditionally Tibetan areas has sometimes caused tension and "incidents" with local Buddhists, but for economic rather than religious reasons. Foreign Islamic organizations have helped fund some Chinese mosques, including one in Lhasa and what is to be China's largest mosque currently under construction near the borders with Laos and Vietnam. Many young Muslims in China view knowledge of Arabic as a route to finding good jobs at the increasing number of Middle Eastern firms with offices in the country. A young Pakistani-educated Muslim in Xining in Qinghai Province travels around China to teach Islam and build ties between local Muslim groups. He is also careful, however, to inform government security officials whenever he invites foreign teachers to the prayer hall he runs out of a small Xining hotel. End Summary.

12. (C) During a recent Consulate and Embassy joint visit to Qinghai Province and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), CG met with two young Muslim activists to discuss the current state of Islam on the Tibet Plateau as well as anecdotal and other reports (ref b) of possible tensions between the Buddhist and Muslim populations. Although Islam as a minority religion in Tibet has a history dating back centuries, labor migration in China during the past decade has brought increasing numbers of Chinese Hui and other Muslims into traditional Tibetan areas. Both of the men CG met with appeared to be in their early thirties and spoke fluent Arabic that they learned while studying or working abroad.

In Search of Islam (and a Job) Overseas  
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13. (C) On February 28, a Tibetan Muslim named Musa (strictly protect) gave CG a private tour of Lhasa's two mosques, located

in the center of town near the Jokhang -- Tibetan Buddhism's most holy temple. Musa described himself as an "Arabic language adviser" to the mosques, stressing he does not possess the necessary qualifications to be an imam or "ahong." He noted the larger of the mosques, which are only about two blocks away from one another, has been the traditional place of worship for Tibetan Muslims whose families came from inland China, while the smaller mosque was originally oriented to Muslim families who reached Tibet from Southwest Asia. Nowadays, however, the main distinction is that the smaller mosque has an Arabic speaking imam who trained abroad and is more popular with younger Muslims than his older counterpart at the large mosque. Musa referred to the older imam as "dull."

14. (C) Musa described how he decided to leave his home in Lhasa during the 1990's to study Islam at a school in Nepal. He wanted to learn more about his religion and also felt he had little opportunity to find a good job in China. The current head of Lhasa's smaller mosque is a former classmate of Musa's in Nepal. Upon his return to Lhasa after five years in Nepal, Musa was unable to find work and decided to accept a scholarship to study at the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI) in Pakistan. He traveled to Pakistan via a flight from Nepal. While at IIUI, Musa was able to meet Muslims from around the world, including Europe and the United States. After two years at IIUI, he landed a job in Dubai where he remained for four years working as an Arabic and Urdu interpreter for the China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC). Although SINOPEC paid him well and he enjoyed working in the Gulf, Musa returned to Lhasa to help take care of an ill family member.

It's Just Business, Not Religion  
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15. (C) Not wishing to go into detail, Musa acknowledged there have been "incidents" of rising tension between Buddhists and Muslims in Tibet within the last several years. He stressed, however, that this has not had anything to do with religion nor

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involved the between 5,000 - 8,000 officially recognized Tibetan Muslims whose families have lived in Tibet for generations. Rather, problems have sometimes arisen due to the increasing numbers of Hui and other Muslims who have migrated to Tibetan areas to work on construction projects or engage in business. Tibetan Buddhists, who often lack the commercial background and networks of Muslim migrants, feel both jealous of and threatened by the newcomers. Musa would not speculate on the total number of Muslims who have settled in the TAR in recent years. He stressed there is no way to know for sure as many only stay for part of the year.

16. (C) Disputes over the harvesting of the lucrative caterpillar fungus ("chong cao") on the Tibetan Plateau, Musa continued, have sometimes resulted in violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims. The large presence of Hui Muslims from Qinghai Province transiting the Tibetan city of Shigatse (four hours by car west of Lhasa) on commercial trips to Nepal has sometimes resulted in "problems." (Note: the imam at Shigatse's only mosque -- located near the famed Tashilhunpo Buddhist Monastery -- told CG in September 2007 only about 300 Muslims live permanently in Shigatse, but that many Muslim businessmen pass through the city. End Note.)

And Business is Booming  
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17. (C) According to Musa, the increasing number of Middle Eastern firms doing business in China is a major boon for Muslim communities throughout the country. Young Chinese Muslims try to learn Arabic not just to read the Koran, but also to find well-paying jobs as interpreters. Many of the 150 students at the madrassa attached to Lhasa's large mosque want to find work in eastern China. The cities of Ningbo, Yiwu, and Guangzhou in particular have become major centers for trade with the Middle East and have attracted numerous Chinese Muslims in search of

employment. (Note: Yiwu's Iraqi-owned firms were featured in an article that appeared in the February 9 edition of the "Economist." End Note.) Musa also mentioned he had heard a number of Arab countries intend to open consulates in Guangzhou. Chinese imams who study in the Middle East can make use of their "foreign "contacts" to bring in outside money to build and refurbish local mosques. Musa said his friend who is the imam at Lhasa's small mosque received money to rebuild it from an organization in Dubai. According to Musa, a Saudi charity is financing the current construction of China's largest mosque located in the town of Shadian in Yunnan Province (ref a).

18. (C) Asked by CG how it is possible to avoid Chinese Government oversight and elicit foreign funding and support for religious activities, Musa replied local authorities often turn a blind eye to anything that does not "cause incidents." He remarked that so long as Chinese Muslims are focused mostly on making money they should not encounter significant difficulties from government officials. Connections and money can solve many problems. Citing himself as an example, Musa remarked he has a brother in the Lhasa police and did not have any trouble getting approval from the TAR bureaucracy to take part in the Hajj. Musa added, however, that it would be very difficult to bring foreign imams to lecture in Lhasa because of the attention it would attract given the relatively small size of the city's Muslim population.

#### Qinghai Activist on the Move

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19. (C) On February 25 in the Qinghai Province capital of Xining, Wang Zhixiang (aka: Yousef bin Ali -- strictly protect) described to CG his background and religious work. Embassy Poloff, Congenoff, and Tibetan LES also participated in the meeting. A local Muslim who speaks Tibetan, Wang runs a prayer hall located on the sixth floor of a small hotel in the city center across the street from the much larger Muslim Mansions Hotel (ref c). Wang did not claim any direct ties to Xining's Dongguan Grand Mosque nor refer to himself to as an imam or ahong. He stressed, however, he has dedicated his life to teaching proper Islamic practice and behavior to what he referred to as China's rapidly growing Muslim population. Like Musa in Lhasa, Wang studied at Pakistan's International Islamic University of Islamabad where he learned Urdu as well as Arabic.

110. (C) According to Wang, there are currently over 1.5 million

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Muslims in Qinghai, well above the official estimate of 500,000. (Note: the total population of Qinghai Province, birthplace of the Dalai Lama, is approximately five million people. End Note.) Initially somewhat guarded in his comments, Wang claimed that Chinese government authorities value the positive role Islam can play in promoting morality and respect for the law. Like Christians, Wang continued, Qinghai's Muslims believe in, "rendering unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar," and maintain excellent relations with local government officials. Not commenting on an August 2007 incident in which Tibetans attacked a mosque in Qinghai's Maqin County following a dispute at a Muslim restaurant (ref b), Wang characterized Buddhist-Muslim relations in Qinghai as "good." He remarked, however, he had heard of "disputes" occurring in the TAR.

111. (C) Wang said he feels strongly about the importance of exchanging ideas and "movement" (Chinese: "liu dong"; Arabic: "haraka") between Muslim communities and organizations within China as well as abroad. He recently led a "tour group" of Hui Muslims from Qinghai to Bangladesh to meet with religious leaders in Dhaka. Wang described how he is also frequently on the road within China in such provinces as Hubei and Guangdong. According to Wang, the main area of China where Muslims encounter significant government interference is Xinjiang. Xinjiang authorities are especially wary of events that bring together large numbers of young men. While not common, it is possible to bring in imams from abroad to lecture at mosques in Xining. Wang has sometimes invited "foreign teachers" to his

lecture hall. While he does not apply for approval, he is careful to inform local security officials so they do not think he is trying to do anything secretly. Wang observed that Qinghai's security structures do not like to be "surprised."

Comments

¶12. (C) Two local Muslims whom Congenoff met on the street in Xining also remarked on the dense network of business and religious ties that exist between Chinese Muslims and the Middle East. Although mosques in Xining receive foreign financial support, the two Muslims stressed private local funding is also considerable. Perhaps spurred on by different motivations, Musa and Wang appear to have made good use of foreign-funded Islamic educational scholarships to give themselves an extra competitive edge back home in China. Their characterization of government officials turning a somewhat blind eye to a resurgence in the study and practice of Islam -- so long as "incidents" or "problems" are avoided -- coincides with what we have been told by Muslim leaders in Yunnan Province.

¶13. (C) Our Tibetan LES observed it is unclear whether Wang, who speaks fluent Tibetan, would be considered by other ethnic Tibetans to be a Tibetan. As he is a follower of Islam in Qinghai, a province in which there are many Hui Muslims, Wang would likely be viewed to be Hui. Nevertheless, his traditional ties to the Plateau and linguistic abilities would allow Wang to blend in and be accepted by Tibetans. Neither Wang in Xining nor Musa in Lhasa would necessarily be associated with the "newcomer Hui."

¶14. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Beijing.  
BOUGHNER